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Goin' Holyrood? A study of voters' online information behaviour when using parties' and candidates' websites during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study of voters' online behaviour conducted during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign. Here, 64 citizens of Aberdeen, North-east Scotland, were observed and questioned while they searched for, browsed and used information on the websites of political parties and candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament. While online campaign sites were generally regarded as serving a useful purpose, as being easy to use and understand, relatively interesting and likely to be visited again, there was very little evidence in this study to indicate that they had any significant impact on voting behaviour during the 2011 Scottish campaign. Rather, the participants' comments suggest that more traditional information sources, particularly print and broadcast media, coupled with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door knocking, continue to be more influential in determining voters' democratic choices.

Keywords: information behaviour; voters; internet; social media; political parties; candidates; elections; campaigns; Scotland

1. Introduction

In May 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) swept to power in the Scottish Parliament elections, forming the first ever Scottish administration with an outright majority. In the immediate aftermath of its victory, the SNP highlighted the crucial role played by its online campaign, including the use of a bespoke voter database, and a new platform, NationBuilder, which integrated Facebook and Twitter with the party's website. Candidates and party activists were encouraged to use these tools to identify, contact and interact with potential voters online, and

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combine this with more traditional face-to-face canvassing work on the street or doorstep. As a result, the SNP claimed that the 2011 campaign was the "first European election where online has swayed the vote" [1] and that their strategy would now be the "model for political parties all over the world" [2].

But what did the Scottish electorate think of the online offerings of the SNP and the other parties during the campaign? Were these sites informative, engaging and likely to impact upon their electoral choice? This paper reports the results of a study of voters' online information behaviour, conducted at the height of the campaign in Aberdeen, North-east Scotland, where members of the public were given the opportunity to explore, and provide critical feedback on, the campaign sites of parties and candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood, Edinburgh. More specifically, the study aimed to:

- Identify motivations for, and barriers to, the public's use of election campaign sites
- Investigate the types of information, tools and technologies the electorate most values when accessing these sites
- Assess the likelihood of such sites being visited again in the future
- Explore the extent to which the use of campaign sites might influence voting behaviour

2. Literature review

Since the mid-1990s, a significant body of literature has emerged that has discussed the use of the Internet as an electoral tool by political actors worldwide. The early literature heralded a general wave of enthusiasm about the potential impact of the Internet on the political sphere, where "mobilisation" or "equalisation" theorists predicted that it would facilitate a new, more participatory style of politics. Within a few years, however, these Utopian claims were being questioned by a second wave of more sceptical voices — "reinforcement" or "normalisation" theorists who argued that the Internet, far from revolutionising political communication and participation, simply reflected and reinforced existing patterns of offline behaviour. More recently, a new wave of optimism has begun to emerge, prompted largely by developments in the US, where, for example, Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign utilised new, more interactive Web 2.0 technologies to raise campaign funds and create networks of supporters and volunteers.

Gibson and Ward [3] provide a concise review of the key studies in the field and note that the literature has been dominated by "supply side" questions, where researchers have quantified the extent to which political actors have adopted online campaign tools, or where they have conducted content analyses of campaign websites. Less attention has been paid to the "demand side" of online electioneering – studies exploring the extent to which the electorate visit campaign sites, or the impact that exposure to these sites has on political participation and voting decisions. Certainly, there have been a number of large-scale quantitative surveys of the public, generally in western, liberal democracies, which have investigated their use of the Internet to obtain and exchange electoral information during campaigns [e.g. 4]. These studies suggest that only modest proportions of the electorate visit campaign sites, but that they are used more frequently by young, well-educated males with an existing interest in politics. There has also been a raft of studies, predominantly conducted in the US, which have used multiple regression techniques to explore relationships between Internet use during elections and citizens' levels of political efficacy or engagement, or of their likelihood of voting. The results of these studies have been mixed: while some have found Internet use to be an important correlate of political knowledge and interest [5], others have found more modest associations [6]. A number of more experimental, laboratory-based investigations have also taken place, again largely in the US, where participants have been exposed to candidates' websites and their attitudes towards political issues and the candidates' characters have then been measured using Likert-type scales in a post-test questionnaire [e.g. 7, 8]. However, due to the differing approaches and objectives of these studies, no clear patterns have emerged from the results.

Most studies of users of online campaign resources have been largely quantitative in nature. The lack of qualitative approaches is bemoaned by those observers who argue that obtaining " a better in-depth understanding of individuals' online experiences" would assist in better shaping the questions asked in quantitative opinion surveys, allowing more precise causal inferences to be drawn about voters' exposure to campaign sites [9]. The largely qualitative approach discussed in this paper is, therefore, particularly timely and potentially significant.

3. Methodological approach

The research was hosted by the Rosemount Community Centre, a community learning facility located in central Aberdeen. At the time of the study, the Centre offered a varied programme of classes, ranging from flower arranging to computing for beginners. In conducting the study in the Centre, it was anticipated that it would satisfy the researchers' long-standing philosophy of getting as close as possible to the everyday lives of their research subjects, and in the process would reach a wide cross-section of the local population. The study took place during the two-week period beginning 18 April 2011, shortly before the election date of 5 May. The researchers were located in the Centre's coffee room, and were successful in persuading 64 individuals to take part in the study. Table 1 provides a summary of the key demographic features of the participants. As can be seen, there was a reasonable spread of ages in the sample, although more females than males participated in the research. When compared with recent official statistics [10], it appeared that, proportionately, the sample was better educated, and from higher socio-economic classes, than the Aberdeen population as a whole.

Table 1. Demographic profile of sample (n = 64)

Number of males	28	Number in higher socio-economic classes	34
Number of females	36	Number in intermediate socio-economic classes	14
Number <30 years old	14	Number in lower socio-economic classes	8
Number 30-64 years old	36	Number who had participated in further education	35
Number >64 years old	14	Number who had participated in higher education	33
Number currently in employment	37	Number living in Aberdeen city	58
Number retired	18	Number registered to vote in North-east Scotland	63

The study used an interactive, electronically-assisted interview method — previously developed by the researchers during a study of the British public's use of parliamentary websites [11] — where the participants were observed and questioned while they searched for and used information on the websites and social media sites of parties and candidates standing for election to the Scottish Parliament. Online access was achieved with the use of a laptop computer and mobile broadband 'dongle' technology; and the interviews varied in length from 13 minutes to almost 50 minutes, depending on the information-seeking techniques, time availability and personal interest of participants. The interview schedule comprised four distinct parts: 1) demographic questions; 2) structured questions on political participation, computer use and past need for campaign information; 3) a free-form period of undirected information seeking on the campaign sites of the participant's choice; and 4) post-search, evaluative questions about the sites just visited.

4. Study results

4.1. Participants' prior political activity and use of computers

The majority of the participants described themselves as regular voters, although just 13 (20.3%) regarded themselves as politically participative in other ways, with their activities including corresponding regularly with elected representatives and campaigning on behalf of a political party. Only 11 (17.2%) had previously looked

for information during an election campaign in order to aid their voting decision. For the majority, their main sources of election information were print and broadcast media, combined with literature received through their doors.

All 64 participants had previous experience of using a computer, with the vast majority (58; 90.6%) finding them 'very' or 'quite' easy to use. Most (53; 82.8%) described themselves as regular Internet users, although 29 (45.3%) had never used social media.

4.2. Free-form period of information seeking

The interviewees were then invited to undertake a period of undirected information seeking, on the party or candidate site(s) of their choice, and overall 71 pages/sections from 32 different sites (14 websites, 12 Facebook pages, one Twitter feed, and five blogs) were explored during these sessions.

The participants' reasons for wishing to view specific sites, or look for particular types of information, were many and various. Twenty-six looked for information about candidates. Amongst these, there were those who simply wanted to establish who their local candidates were; those who knew their candidates' names, but desired additional biographical information; those who wanted a general look at "*what they've got to say for themselves*"; and those who wished to explore the candidates' opinions on specific local policy issues. Meanwhile, 44 participants looked for party-related information. Ten freely offered the name of their preferred party and decided to go to that party's site for a general "*look around*"; while the others chose to have a general look at the sites of one or more parties, to browse these parties' manifestos, or to investigate their stances on certain policy issues, including education, employment and the environment.

These periods of information seeking elicited a wealth of rich, evaluative and thoughtful comment from the participants, and some of the main themes emerging from the data are discussed below.

Candidate information. Of the 26 respondents who sought information on their constituency candidates, some expressed pleasant surprise that individual candidates had their own web presence. There was an expectation here that only the youngest candidates, or perhaps the party leaders, would be active online. Equally, though, some interviewees expressed disappointment that not all candidates had a personal site (of the 77 candidates standing in North-east Scotland, just 27 had a site of some kind). As one interviewee remarked, in noting the lack of Facebook pages: "*I mean, it's free. The fact that they're not taking advantage of a free media that's used by millions of people does surprise me*". Opinions were also equally divided about the types of information expected on candidates' sites. There were those who felt that biographical information, particularly a candidate's educational and employment history, was an important factor in determining their potential worth as an elected representative. In contrast, there were those interviewees to whom the candidates' backgrounds were of little importance. Instead, they preferred to see details of their positions on important policy issues: "*I'm only interested in what he's got to say politically. I'm not interested in any of that other stuff*". Indeed, a number of these participants searched, on either the candidate pages of party websites or on the candidates' own sites, for their personal views on specific local issues, including controversial plans to redevelop a Victorian park in the city centre, and much-delayed plans for an Aberdeen bypass road. These searches, however, were largely in vain, as only one candidate was found to provide explicit personal policy statements; the other pages examined contained little personal opinion.

Party manifestos and other policy statements. Thirty-five participants examined election manifestos or other policy statements appearing on party sites. The dominant theme emerging here was of a need for conciseness in the presentation of policy information. The manifestos of the major parties were relatively lengthy documents, and respondents displayed little appetite for reading these in any detail. As one said, when faced with the SNP's 44-page manifesto: "*There's just too much here, shouting at you. I'd just like to see something short and snappy, with bullet points of what they're planning to change*". This is something that the SNP itself recognised during the campaign [2], and launched a series of additional two-page 'mini-manifestos' online, each one dealing with a

specific policy area (e.g. justice) or aimed at a certain sector of the electorate (e.g. carers). Such examples of concise policy statements certainly appeared to resonate with participants. For instance, one interviewee said of the Green Party's 'Vision and Policy' page: "*So this is a sort of a summary of their manifesto. They've got four interconnected principles. I think that's very good…it's succinct and straightforward*".

Participants expressed disappointment at a perceived lack of local policy commentary on the party sites. It is perhaps fair to say that although sub-national issues were discussed across the sites, in manifestos and in news articles, the user would have to search long and hard to find those relating specifically to North-east Scotland. Much of the more prominent content appeared to refer to proposed developments in other parts of Scotland, such as a new Forth Road Bridge, and a coal-fired power station at Hunterston, Ayrshire. This led one participant to remark: "*If there was something in Aberdeen that was directly in my interest, then I would maybe go in and look at it. But I couldn't really give two hoots about what's going on in Orkney*". In this respect, particular criticism was reserved for the 'In Your Area' section of the Liberal Democrats' website, which was entered by a number of participants in the expectation of finding information on "*what they're doing in Aberdeen*", only to be presented with a list of existing elected representatives for the local area.

Use of social media. Forty participants examined social media sites, mostly Facebook pages. For 17 of these individuals, these sessions provided their first experience of using social media. Only five interviewees described the sites in generally positive terms, largely in relation to the brevity and currency of the campaign posts being made. The vast majority were decidedly unimpressed with the politicians' offerings, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, it was felt that there was a distinct lack of substance to their posts: indeed, "*trivial*", "*puerile*", "*shallow*" and "*superficial*" were among the terms used to describe the content. The interviewees felt that the sites examined contained little meaningful policy comment, with any pertinent information becoming lost amidst the many personal, non-political posts made by candidates. Secondly, many of the posts consisted almost entirely of photographs, of candidates and party activists engaged in canvassing activities, which proved of little interest. And thirdly, participants were disappointed to find little dialogue taking place online. Interestingly, part of the SNP's digital strategy was to encourage their candidates to converse with potential voters using social media [12], but there was little evidence of this occurring amongst their candidates studied here. Indeed, one interviewee, noting an SNP candidate's reluctance to respond openly to questions and criticisms, observed: "*If there's no debate, people just won't bother to make the effort. If you try and get them to respond to you, and they don't, you just give up*". Despite this apparent desire to see more interaction taking place, only six participants indicated that they themselves would be willing to publicly question or criticise a politician using social media, or show public support for a candidate or party by 'liking' them or becoming a 'friend' or 'follower'. Most instead expressed concerns about security, or indicated that they would prefer to communicate privately with politicians, by email or verbally.

Currency of information. Fifteen participants discussed the currency of the information provided on the sites. The larger parties' websites tended to have regularly updated campaign news pages, and these were regarded favourably by interviewees. Additional praise was directed towards the websites of the Greens and the SNP, which each featured live feeds from the respective party Twitter accounts. In contrast, some of the candidate Facebook pages and blogs had not been updated for several weeks. While one interviewee was prepared to give these candidates the benefit of the doubt, suggesting that they must instead be busy canvassing on a face-to-face basis, others were less understanding: "*You'd think it would be a bit more topical, wouldn't you? We're within two weeks of the election now*".

Accessibility. Twelve interviewees raised issues concerning the accessibility of the sites, in terms of the language used and the format(s) in which information was presented. Six of these respondents, noting that "people have different reading abilities", were critical of the small size and density of the text on some sites. While two interviewees acknowledged that they personally had learning difficulties and were struggling to comprehend some of the information presented: "*Summary budget doesn't mean anything to me – I don't know what that*

means. There's just too much big words…". Another respondent, an adult literacy worker, criticised the general lack of content in alternative formats and felt it would be useful if parties were to provide online audio versions of some of the key textual information presented. Indeed, it should be noted that, in their previous research, the authors have mapped a disappointing decline in the provision of information in alternative formats by Scottish parties during successive campaigns [13]. Three participants specifically discussed the language and grammar used on the sites of the far-right party, the British National Party. While two of these individuals mocked the authors' efforts – "*I wouldn't vote for anybody that couldn't write in sentences*" – the other hypothesized that the "*very simple language*" was used in an effort to reach "*a certain kind of voter...people who are less educated, or unemployed*".

Images and imagery. The imagery adopted by the parties, particularly those at the extreme ends of the political spectrum, was highlighted by six respondents. Four expressed their unease with the Union Jack and 'British Bulldog' motifs prevalent on the sites of the two far-right parties standing for election; while two interviewees commented on the numerous photographs of placard-bearing demonstrators appearing on the left-wing SSP site, suggesting that these were unlikely to appeal to the floating voter.

Negative versus positive campaigning. In viewing various sites, nine participants raised the issue of negative campaigning, where parties and candidates appeared to focus on criticising their opponents rather than positively promoting their own political ideals. These interviewees were unanimous in their disapproval of such an approach: "*Here we go again, bashing other parties. I think that's counter-productive*". In contrast, examples of more positive campaigning techniques were regarded favourably, and in this respect the SNP website was generally praised for its more upbeat tone, the result of a strategic decision to promote a positive message based on the party's achievements in government [2]. However, this did not always manifest itself in the Facebook posts of one SNP candidate, who was criticised by participants for "*slagging other parties*".

Celebrity endorsements. Four users of the SNP website commented on the party's use of celebrity endorsements, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years. While there is some evidence to suggest that celebrity endorsements do little to enhance the appeal of parties to the Scottish electorate [14], images and video clips featuring well-known Scottish actors and musicians were displayed prominently on the SNP site. While one young participant believed that this "*tends to give you confidence in the party*", the other three interviewees were unimpressed. One felt it "*smacks of desperation*", while another said he preferred his politicians "*to have a little bit of gravitas*".

4.3. Post-search questions

The periods of information seeking were followed by a series of structured, evaluative questions. Forty-nine (76.6%) of the respondents believed that the types of sites they had just visited were a useful way of providing campaign information, although 15 of these felt that they would be of greater benefit to younger, more computer-literate voters. The Internet was generally regarded as a cost-effective way of disseminating up-to-date campaign information to a wide audience, although many respondents felt that the parties and candidates could be doing more to advertise the existence of such sites. Some participants envisaged a future where the online site would replace the traditional campaign leaflet delivery, although others hoped that the Internet would not become the main focus of elections, and should instead complement existing campaign methods: "*What we wouldn't want is them withdrawing to a darkened room somewhere just putting messages out on the Internet. You still need to see your candidates*".

In terms of ease of use, the vast majority of participants described the campaign sites as 'very' (64.1%) or 'quite' easy (32.8%) to use. The content of the sites was also regarded as comprehensible, with most describing it as 'very' (70.3%) or 'quite' easy (28.1%) to understand. Opinions were more divided, however, on how interesting they had found the content: while 16 (25%) felt it 'very interesting', over half (33; 51.6%) thought it

only 'quite interesting' and 15 (23.4%) described it as 'not interesting at all'. Despite not being overly enthused about the content, around two-thirds (44; 68.8%) indicated that they might look at campaign sites again, either further exploring the site(s) they had just seen, or extending their search to other sites "to see what the other parties have got on there". Of the 20 participants who felt it unlikely that they would ever visit such sites again, most indicated that they would continue to rely solely on more traditional sources of campaign information: "*I'll probably just stick to the TV and newspapers*".

Finally, participants were asked if the information they had just seen had helped them in deciding which way they were likely to vote. There was little evidence here of any significant impact on voting behaviour. One respondent indicated that seeing the Greens' website had persuaded him to give them his second, regional list vote; while a 40-year-old female interviewee suggested that exploring the campaign sites had kindled an interest in voting for the very first time. Meanwhile, two participants who had examined the far-right parties' sites both indicated that this had merely reinforced their opinion that they would never consider voting for these parties. For the vast majority (60 of the 64 participants), the interactive sessions had had no influence on their democratic choice. Some noted that their decision had already been made, based on information obtained via traditional media; while a number indicated that they had a long-established allegiance to a specific party, which was unlikely to be affected by receiving campaign information, either online or offline. Some others felt that they had neither the time nor the patience to visit a range of campaign sites. Indeed, a small number expressed a desire to see some form of central, politically neutral site, where voters could readily compare and contrast the profiles and policy aims of all local parties and candidates

5. Conclusions and further research

The interactive, electronically-assisted interview method was successful in eliciting a rich stream of data from voters about the use and potential impact of online election campaign sites. This study did, of course, have its limitations, in that its largely qualitative approach involved a relatively small number of participants (64), and that 91% of these lived within Aberdeen. The current authors would, therefore, lay no claims to the participants' opinions being representative of the wider Scottish electorate. However, the research did reveal a number of key issues relating to voters' information needs and information-seeking behaviour, which might inform political actors' future use of the Internet for campaign purposes, in Scotland or elsewhere.

Perhaps the most dominant theme to emerge is that of a need for brevity and clarity in the presentation of policy information. Very few participants were prepared to spend time perusing lengthy, verbose party manifestos. Instead, many expressed a need for short, sharp, "bite-size" policy statements that can be read and digested with relative ease. While some Scottish parties are already taking steps to present their policy goals in a more concise, user-friendly fashion there is clearly much to be done in this regard.

The study also highlighted a need for currency in the information provided online. While the party sites were generally regarded favourably for their provision of up-to-date election news, voters were bemused by those candidate sites where the content remained static throughout the crucial campaign period. Indeed, this lack of online activity understandably led participants to question the rationale for these candidates establishing a campaign site. As one asked succinctly, "*Why have it?*"

A clear need was also demonstrated for policy statements and commentary relating specifically to local constituency issues. In this respect, the parties' sites were perceived as being wanting: although some sub-national policy information was present, it tended to become 'lost' amongst other site content. As national party sites appear to face challenges in being 'all things to all people', the current authors would argue that it is even more incumbent upon the individual candidates and their campaign teams to provide online information on specific local questions, or on how national agendas might affect their potential constituents. Yet, several of the candidate sites explored in this study were lacking any significant policy commentary: the contestants in North-east Scotland often appeared more interested in discussing the weather rather than the issues being raised by voters. At the time of writing, the authors are undertaking content analyses of all Scottish candidate sites to establish if this pattern was replicated across the country. In terms of local policy information provision, the

current authors would also suggest that a more prominent role be afforded to the online sites of local branches of political parties. The larger parties in Scotland have a number of regional associations, many of which have their own sites containing political information and news with a more local slant. However, their existence is barely acknowledged on national party websites, with only the Conservatives and the Greens currently providing relatively prominent links to their regional sites.

A desire to see more online engagement between politicians and voters was also evident in the study. Here, however, the participants' comments were somewhat contradictory, in that they expressed disappointment with the current levels of debate on the social media sites of parties and candidates, yet were themselves reluctant to enter into any form of public dialogue with political actors or other voters. The content analysis of all Scottish candidates' social media sites currently taking place will attempt to establish whether this reticence, on the part of both politicians and voters, was a national rather than just a North-east Scotland phenomenon.

Overall, then, while online campaign sites were generally regarded as serving a useful purpose, as being easy to use and understand, relatively interesting and likely to be visited again, there was very little evidence in this study to indicate that they had any significant impact on voting behaviour during the 2011 Scottish campaign. Rather, it would suggest that more traditional information sources, particularly print and broadcast media, coupled with long-established campaign techniques, such as leaflet deliveries and door knocking, continue to be more influential in determining voters' democratic choices.

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